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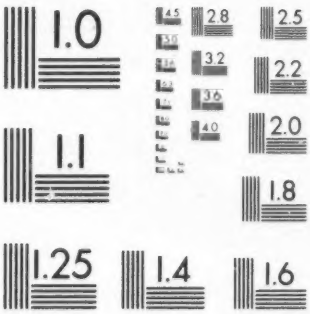

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ABSTRACT

This investigation of survey research methodology examined the satisfaction differences between anonymous and identified respondents to a client satisfaction survey from a university counseling center. A questionnaire based on the Counseling Services Assessment Blank was mailed to 410 students terminated from counseling during the 1980-81 academic year. The cover letter explained that both response and self identification were optional. The response rate was 59 percent, and 25 percent of the responses were anonymous. Identified respondents reported greater treatment satisfaction levels than did anonymous respondents. Further research is necessary: (1) to confirm the assumption that anonymous respondents provide more accurate information; (2) to determine the influence of perceived survey data uses on responses; and (3) to clarify the satisfaction differences of respondents and non-respondents. (BS)

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A Comparison of Anonymous and Identified Respondents To a Client Satisfaction Survey[1]

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A Comparison of Anonymous and Identified Respondents To a Client Satisfaction Survey

ABSTRACT

This article presents a comparison of anonymous and identified respondents to a client satisfaction survey.

During the last ten years there have been increasing admonitions for counseling centers to become more accountable in their work (Burck and Peterson, 1975; Krumboltz, 1974; Kuh, 1979; Trembly and Bishop, 1974); enhance their evaluation and research efforts (Bingham & Tucker, 1981; Kuh, 1979; Pipes, 1982), while maintaining quality delivery and outcome of services. These are important charges, particularly in a time of decreasing and scarce resources. Many research strategies have been used by counseling centers for evaluation and research efforts. In mental health settings consumer satisfaction surveys are often used to evaluate client satisfaction with the outcome of treatment (Lebow, 1982; Resnick, 1978).

Survey research methodology, when used to evaluate counseling outcome, has both advantages and disadvantages (Lebow, 1982). For example, survey research is an economical method of reaching a large number of respondents at relatively low cost. Its disadvantages include an often small rate of return in studies where questionnaires are mailed to respondents, typically 30% for counseling center studies (Greenfield and Wyatt, 1982) and roughly 50% for mental health centers in general (Lebow, 1982).

An important issue to consider when conducting a client satisfaction survey is whether or not respondents are asked to identify themselves. Previous investigations in which the effects of nonresponse or anonymity on a variety of survey instruments has lead to contradictory findings which highlight important issues to consider when undertaking research of this kind. Lebow (1982) concludes from his review that respondents in comparison to nonrespondents are more likely to have mutual terminations, longer treatments and treatments therapists'

evaluate successful. He believes "...the potential distortion from selective attrition must be considered in conducting or evaluating any study" (Lebow, 1982, p. 246). In a similar vein, Miller (1978) briefly reviewed the literature concerning the possible differences between anonymous and identified respondents to a variety of attitude, personality and survey instruments. He concluded that in some cases no significant differences exist between these groups while other studies he cites report small, though statistically significant, differences between anonymous and identified respondents.

As a summary statement concerning the possible distortions that may exist in survey data, Lebow (1982) concludes that:

> "Consumers may alter their responses as they consider who will read these surveys, how the surveyors will regard them, and how the surveys will affect their future requests for service and the careers of the practioners who offered them treatment. Distortion can be expected to increase as surveys are more directly presented to staff, as anonymity decreases, as consumers are more under the control of the institution, and as repercussions for staff from the survey increase" (p. 247).

The amount of perceived threat to the respondent is thought to influence the decision of whether or not to return the satsifaction questionnaire and the extent to which responses are distorted. Rosen (1960) suggests the greater the perceived threat to the respondent, the more likely that identified and anonymous respondents answer the same questions differently.

Most studies comparing anonymous and identified survey respondents

have been undertaken in settings other than a university counseling center. However, Miller (1978) using a survey with a follow-up letter sent to former clients, found that anonymous respondents reported fewer positive changes between the time they began and completed counseling than did identified respondents. The purpose of this study was to further examine how anonymous and identified respondents to a client satisfaction survey may differ regarding their satisfaction with counseling from a university counseling center.

Method

Participants must have completed an intake interview and been assigned a counselor by the Director of Clinical Services at a large Midwestern university's counseling service to have been included in the sample. All clients who met these prerequisites and were terminated from counseling during the 1980-81 academic year (N = 410) were included in this study.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this project was based on the Counseling Services Assessment Blank (Hurst & Weigel, 1968). It included 13 Likert-type items which assess client perceived outcomes and satisfaction with various aspects of treatment. The questionnaire also contained requests for demographic information, open-ended items which assessed client perceived positive and negative outcomes, and inquires into how clients

and the university community might be better served by the counseling center.

Procedures

The questionnaire and a cover letter were sent to clients four weeks following their termination from counseling. The cover letter described the study and informed potential respondents that they were under no obligation to complete and return the questionnaire, and that not to do so would in no way harm their status as a student or future client. Clients were also told that if they chose to respond, they could either identify themselves or return the questionnaire anonymously. Clients were assured we were interested in their honest reactions to our services. A stamped and return addressed envelope was also included in the materials sent.

Potential respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire and return it to the counseling center. Two weeks after the intiial mailing all clients who had not identified themselves and returned the questionnaire were sent a reminder letter. Two weeks following sending the reminder, the original materials and another cover letter were sent to nonrespondents.

Results

Fifty questionnaires did not reach clients (the questionnaire was returned through the U.S. mail as undeliverable, the client did not want a questionnaire sent to him/her, or the questionnaire was sent to the client at the end of the academic year and returned because of no forwarding address). This reduced the number of potential respondents to 360. Of these, 213 questionnaires were returned for a 59% response rate.

Twenty-five percent (n = 53) of the respondents returned the questionnaire anonymously. For respondents where this information was available (n = 160), 52% returned the questionnaire without a reminder, 21% of the questionnaires were returned after the first reminder, and the remaining were returned after the second reminder (28%). Most respondents lived off campus (75%), were upper level students (66%), were Caucasian (95%), were liberal arts students (59%), and were female (56 %).

As is typical with research of this nature (Lebow, 1982; Resnick, 1978), most respondents were more favorable than unfavorable in their evaluation of the services they received. Summary statistics and a summary of the item comparisons between identified and anonymous respondents are displayed in Table 1. T-tests for unequal sample sizes were used for statistical comparisons.

Examination of Table 1 shows that most respondents felt they benefited from the treatment they received. However, anonymous respondents reported less satisfaction with counseling ($\bar{x}$ = 3.5, S.D. = 1.2) than identified respondents ($\bar{x}$ = 4.1, S.D. = 1.0), $P \leq .001$. Anonymous respondents also reported lower resolution of inner conflict ($\bar{x}$ = 3.1, S.D. = 1.1) than did identified respondents ($\bar{x}$ = 3.7, S.D. = 1.2), $P \leq .001$. Compared to respondents who identified themselves, anonymous respondents were less comfortable in the reception area ($\bar{x}$ = 3.7, S.D. = 1.1 vs. $\bar{x}$ = 4.0, S.D. = .9), $P \leq .05$; felt counseling facilities less appropriate ($\bar{x}$ = 3.9, S.D. = .9 vs. $\bar{x}$ = 4.1, S.D. = .8), $P \leq .05$; were less likely to recommend counseling services ($\bar{x}$ = 3.9, S.D. = 1.2 vs. $\bar{x}$ = 4.5, S.D. = .8), $P \leq .001$; and felt they were less likely to deal with their problems effectively ($\bar{x}$ = 3.6, S.D. = .9 vs. $\bar{x}$ = 4.0, S.D. = .8), $P \leq .001$.

Insert Table 1 here.

Discussion

The data presented here are consistent with data reported by Miller (1978) where identified respondents reported greater levels of satisfaction with treatment than did anonymous respondents. The explanation for this difference can only be speculated upon. Perhaps, as Rosen (1960) suggests, responding anonymously is less threatening to former clients than is identifying oneself and having this information available to one's former counselor.

Further research examining the underlying reasons why clients may distort questionnaire responses when identified is needed. Whether anonymous or identified respondents are responding more openly and accurately reporting their opinion is unclear. The assumption that anonymous respondents are providing more accurate information than identified respondents requires empirical documentation. Additional methodological issues (which are summarized by Lebow, 1982) in need of further study include how respondents' awareness of different uses (research, accountability, feedback to counselors, etc.) of satisfaction and outcome data may influence their decision to respond anonymously, identify themselves, or respond at all.

A related area requiring additional research concerns the possible differences in perceived satisfaction that may exist between respondents who complete and return a questionnaire and those who do not respond at all to a client satisfaction survey. These groups may differ with respect to their evaluation of treatment outcome and satisfaction. Clarifying the possible differences that may exist between respondents and non-respondents would result in a more accurate perspective in the use of client survey information regarding client satisfaction for accountability, evaluation and research purposes.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Identified and Anonymous Respondents

	Respondents						
	Identified			Anonymous			
Item	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	t
learned about self[a]	3.7	1.1	154	3.4	1.2	51	1.8
learned about world[a]	3.1	1.1	113	2.7	1.1	38	1.8
resolved inner conflict[a]	3.7	1.2	153	3.1	1.1	48	3.4**
resolved conflict with others[a]	3.2	1.2	128	2.9	1.1	42	1.6
increased skill level[a]	2.7	1.1	72	2.3	.9	22	1.4
saw counselor in reasonable amount of time[b]	4.4	.8	154	4.3	1.0	52	.7
receptionists were helpful[b]	4.4	.6	159	4.2	.7	53	1.4
was comfortable in reception area[b]	4.0	.9	159	3.7	1.1	53	2.2*
counseling facilities were appropriate[b]	4.1	.8	157	3.9	.9	54	2.2*
deal with problems more effectively[b]	4.0	.8	156	3.6	.9	52	3.4**
satisfied with counseling experience[b]	4.1	1.0	155	3.5	1.2	54	3.8**
would recommend services	4.5	.8	155	3.9	1.2	54	3.6**
needs were met[b]	3.9	1.1	155	3.6	1.2	53	1.7

[a]Likert scale anchors are as follows: 1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = somewhat, 4 = quite a lot, 5 = a great deal.

[b]Likert scale anchors are as follows: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

*$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .001$.

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